



## International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

---

Volume 6 | Number 2

Article 14

---

7-2012

# Innovative Conference Curriculum: Maximizing Learning and Professionalism

Nancy Hyland

Argosy University, [nhyland@argosy.edu](mailto:nhyland@argosy.edu)

Jeannine Kranzow

Argosy University, [jkranzow@argosy.edu](mailto:jkranzow@argosy.edu)

---

### Recommended Citation

Hyland, Nancy and Kranzow, Jeannine (2012) "Innovative Conference Curriculum: Maximizing Learning and Professionalism," *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*: Vol. 6: No. 2, Article 14.  
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.20429/ijstl.2012.060214>

---

# Innovative Conference Curriculum: Maximizing Learning and Professionalism

## **Abstract**

This action research study evaluated the potential of an innovative curriculum to move 73 graduate students toward professional development. The curriculum was grounded in the professional conference and utilized the motivation and expertise of conference presenters. This innovation required students to be more independent, act as a critical friend, and be a part of a professional learning community. Faculty assumed the role of faculty guide, which altered both the faculty and student course experience. Student professional development findings are discussed. Results indicate that this type of curriculum can be highly effective for a graduate course. Recommendations for future research are discussed.

## **Keywords**

Curriculum, Conference, Learning community, Faculty role

## **Creative Commons License**

[Creative](#)

[Commons](#)

[Attribution-](#)

[Noncommercial-](#)

[No](#)

[Derivative](#)

[Works](#)

[4.0](#)

[License](#)

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0](#)

[License](#).

[Noncommercial-](#)

[No](#)

[Derivative](#)

[Works](#)

[4.0](#)

[License](#)

[License](#).

[Noncommercial-](#)

[No](#)

[Derivative](#)

[Works](#)

[4.0](#)

[License](#)

[License](#).

[Noncommercial-](#)

[No](#)

[Derivative](#)

[Works](#)

[4.0](#)

[License](#)

[License](#).

[Noncommercial-](#)

[No](#)

[Derivative](#)

[Works](#)

[4.0](#)

[License](#)

[License](#).

[Noncommercial-](#)

[No](#)

[Derivative](#)

[Works](#)

[4.0](#)

[License](#)

[License](#).

[Noncommercial-](#)

[No](#)

[Derivative](#)

[Works](#)

[4.0](#)

[License](#)

[License](#).

[Noncommercial-](#)

[No](#)

[Derivative](#)

[Works](#)

[4.0](#)

[License](#)

[License](#).

[Noncommercial-](#)

[No](#)

[Derivative](#)

[Works](#)

[4.0](#)

[License](#)

[License](#).

[Noncommercial-](#)

[No](#)

[Derivative](#)

[Works](#)

[4.0](#)

[License](#)

[License](#).

[Noncommercial-](#)

[No](#)

[Derivative](#)

[Works](#)

[4.0](#)

[License](#)

[License](#).

[Noncommercial-](#)

[No](#)

[Derivative](#)

[Works](#)

[4.0](#)

[License](#)

[License](#).

[Noncommercial-](#)

[No](#)

[Derivative](#)

[Works](#)

[4.0](#)

[License](#)

[License](#).

[Noncommercial-](#)

[No](#)

[Derivative](#)

[Works](#)

[4.0](#)

[License](#)

[License](#).

[Noncommercial-](#)

[No](#)

[Derivative](#)

[Works](#)

[4.0](#)

[License](#)

[License](#).

[Noncommercial-](#)

[No](#)

[Derivative](#)

[Works](#)

[4.0](#)

[License](#)

[License](#).

[Noncommercial-](#)

[No](#)

[Derivative](#)

[Works](#)

[4.0](#)

[License](#)

[License](#).

[Noncommercial-](#)

[No](#)

[Derivative](#)

[Works](#)

[4.0](#)

[License](#)

[License](#).

[Noncommercial-](#)

[No](#)

[Derivative](#)

[Works](#)

[4.0](#)

[License](#)

[License](#).

[Noncommercial-](#)

[No](#)

[Derivative](#)

[Works](#)

[4.0](#)

[License](#)

[License](#).

[Noncommercial-](#)

[No](#)

[Derivative](#)

[Works](#)

[4.0](#)

[License](#)

[License](#).

[Noncommercial-](#)

[No](#)

[Derivative](#)

[Works](#)

[4.0](#)

[License](#)

[License](#).

[Noncommercial-](#)

[No](#)

[Derivative](#)

[Works](#)

[4.0](#)

[License](#)

[License](#).

[Noncommercial-](#)

[No](#)

[Derivative](#)

[Works](#)

[4.0](#)

[License](#)

[License](#).

[Noncommercial-](#)

[No](#)

[Derivative](#)

[Works](#)

[4.0](#)

[License](#)

[License](#).

[Noncommercial-](#)

[No](#)

[Derivative](#)

[Works](#)

[4.0](#)

[License](#)

[License](#).

[Noncommercial-](#)

[No](#)

[Derivative](#)

[Works](#)

[4.0](#)

[License](#)

[License](#).

[Noncommercial-](#)

[No](#)

[Derivative](#)

[Works](#)

[4.0](#)

[License](#)

[License](#).

[Noncommercial-](#)

[No](#)

[Derivative](#)

[Works](#)

[4.0](#)

[License](#)

[License](#).

[Noncommercial-](#)

[No](#)

[Derivative](#)

[Works](#)

[4.0](#)

[License](#)

[License](#).

[Noncommercial-](#)

[No](#)

[Derivative](#)

[Works](#)

[4.0](#)

[License](#)

[License](#).

[Noncommercial-](#)

[No](#)

[Derivative](#)

[Works](#)

[4.0](#)

[License](#)

[License](#).

[Noncommercial-](#)

[No](#)

[Derivative](#)

[Works](#)

[4.0](#)

[License](#)

[License](#).

[Noncommercial-](#)

[No](#)

[Derivative](#)

[Works](#)

[4.0](#)

[License](#)

[License](#).

[Noncommercial-](#)

[No](#)

[Derivative](#)

[Works](#)

[4.0](#)

[License](#)

[License](#).

[Noncommercial-](#)

[No](#)

[Derivative](#)

[Works](#)

[4.0](#)

[License](#)

[License](#).

[Noncommercial-](#)

[No](#)

[Derivative](#)

[Works](#)

[4.0](#)

[License](#)

[License](#).

[Noncommercial-](#)

[No](#)

[Derivative](#)

[Works](#)

[4.0](#)

[License](#)

[License](#).

[Noncommercial-](#)

[No](#)

[Derivative](#)

[Works](#)

[4.0](#)

[License](#)

[License](#).

[Noncommercial-](#)

[No](#)

[Derivative](#)

[Works](#)

[4.0](#)

[License](#)

[License](#).

[Noncommercial-](#)

[No](#)

[Derivative](#)

[Works](#)

[4.0](#)

[License](#)

[License](#).

[Noncommercial-](#)

[No](#)

[Derivative](#)

[Works](#)

[4.0](#)

[License](#)

[License](#).

[Noncommercial-](#)

[No](#)

[Derivative](#)

[Works](#)

[4.0](#)

## **Innovative Conference Curriculum: Maximizing Learning and Professionalism**

**Nancy Hyland**

Argosy University  
Tampa, Florida, USA  
[nhyland@argosy.edu](mailto:nhyland@argosy.edu)

**Jeannine Kranzow**

Argosy University  
Tampa, Florida, USA  
[jkranzow@argosy.edu](mailto:jkranzow@argosy.edu)

### **Abstract**

This action research study evaluated the potential of an innovative curriculum to move 73 graduate students toward professional development. The curriculum was grounded in the professional conference and utilized the motivation and expertise of conference presenters. This innovation required students to be more independent, act as a critical friend, and be a part of a professional learning community. Faculty assumed the role of faculty guide, which altered both the faculty and student course experience. Student professional development findings are discussed. Results indicate that this type of curriculum can be highly effective for a graduate course. Recommendations for future research are discussed.

**Keywords:** curriculum, conference, learning community, faculty role

### **Introduction**

While most college students are capable of self-motivation, many come into undergraduate and graduate programs as dependent learners (Kranzow & Hyland, 2009). This paper discusses a study which examined the potential of integrating an innovative curriculum and a professional conference to inspire graduate students toward intrinsically motivated professional development and creativity. Nieweg (1995) reminds us that within this intention “the character of learning shifts from reproductive learning to independent problem solving” (p. 206). Students can move from dependent to independent learners within the right conditions.

For many possible reasons including lack of exposure or appreciation (Lovitts, 2005) or perhaps expense, many graduate students are not accustomed to attending professional conferences, and few institutions take advantage of the many outstanding professional conferences and annual meetings being presented around their campuses each year. Two of the faculty members at a graduate institution on the Florida gulf coast recognized these two points and sought an innovative curricular approach to inspiring and motivating graduate students to embrace research, creativity, high-level professionalism, and professional mentors or models (Kranzow & Hyland, 2009).

Clearly, the importance of a motivated, creative, independent student extends into the professional arena where successful practitioners are expected to demonstrate self-direction. Engagement in professional development is frequently viewed as the evidence of

this independent learning which is translated as the catalyst for changing practice. It is in the change dynamic that professionals, according to Le Cornu (2009), will "learn to take responsibility for who they are and the views they hold: views that are themselves formed and strengthened by the process of critical reflection. So a sense of a separate self is constructed" (p. 286). It is within this new self, that the practitioner discovers the power to examine, challenge and commit to a continual renewal of their practice through formal and informal professional development.

While branching out of traditional pedagogies is sure to meet with resistance, the authors find it worth the risk. This paper is a discussion of the action research (Gordon, 2008; Stringer, 2007) surrounding the potential of the conference to increase graduate student creativity, motivation, and professional competence and confidence. The data indicates that the conference-based course and corresponding, co-constructed syllabus has the potential to actively engage students in a challenging learning experience that not only meets the standards of a traditional course but challenges students to move beyond simply meeting requirements, thus re-inventing the common higher education observation of Nieweg (2004) "They do whatever the program requires and usually nothing beyond this" (p.205). Through co-construction of the knowledge base, the student is invited into the syllabus planning and becomes an active participant in the learning endeavor. As Wlodkowski and Westover (1999) suggest,

most people are highly motivated to learn when they feel included (respected within the learning group), have a positive attitude (find the subject matter relevant), can make learning meaningful (find learning engaging and challenging), and are becoming competent (effective at what they value).  
(p. 1)

This early engagement provided the initial space for building knowledge content and critical reflection within an environment that intentionally embraced motivation and socialization as essential components of learning. As Gardner's (2008) work indicates, a motivated learner is likely to be a more successful student and a more successful student is more likely to be retained by the institution. This shared success is centered on an appreciation that "self-directed learning demands a stimulating environment, designed to facilitate students to search for meaningful contexts, professional skills and knowledge" (Nieweg, 2004, p. 200). Another consideration influencing success which Guglielmino (2008) points out is that, "Accreditation standards for many professions now also examine preparation programs for evidence that they prepare their learners for continued, self-directed lifelong learning" (p. 5). While the primary focus should be on the learner, institutions are critically concerned with graduating their students; yet this does not dismiss the reciprocal benefits the learner and the institution bring to society as a whole.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this action research study (cycles one and two completed) was to investigate whether the professional conference can be integrated into curriculum such that graduate students increase their level of professional development, self-motivation and creativity. This strategic innovation within the higher education context is supported by Livingston (2010) who claims that, "Higher Education needs to use its natural resources in ways that develop content knowledge and skills in a culture that is infused at new levels by investigation, cooperation, connection, integration and synthesis" (p. 59). For the authors,

Livingston's action-oriented paradigm took the form of both a pedagogical and curriculum innovation.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The framework for this new approach was grounded in the theories of constructivism (Windschitl, 2002), critical thinking (Brookfield, 2005), professionalism, motivation and creativity, building on the work of Hay and Barab (2001) which posits that learners must come to knowledge on their own and have opportunities to discuss their growth. The U.S. Department of Education (2006) recommends that colleges and universities embrace a culture of continuous innovation and quality improvement by developing new pedagogies, curricula, and technologies to improve learning. Livingston (2010) states that, "As long as we cleave only to traditional pedagogies and courses of study that leaves little or no room for new experiences, we will not find the time or space for nurturing the act of creativity" (p.59).

The course, situated in a Spring 2009 international conference and later in a Spring 2010 international conference, provided both the time and space for student independent learning, creativity, syllabus co-construction, critical thinking, and professionalization. The context for accomplishing these elements necessitated a learning paradigm (Barr & Tagg, 1995) in which the focus would change from teaching to learning; affirm the importance of the learning community, and value knowledge construction through the lens of socialization. However, even as the authors sought to create this participatory innovation, they understood, as did Colin and Heaney (2001), that "...the challenge to create a participatory practice within the higher education classroom inevitably involves pushing the borders, anticipating and countering resistance" (p.30).

### **Description of the Study**

#### **The "Conference Experiment"**

This experiment sought to determine if using an innovative curriculum within the context of a professional conference could be an effective vehicle for increasing not only graduate student knowledge, but also self-motivation and creativity. The experiment context necessitated a re-defining of roles from two perspectives: a) the faculty, and b) the conference presenter. As Patterson (2007) states, "To be successful in experiential learning in higher education, faculty require a different set of skills from those of traditional higher education" (p.80).

In redefining the instructor role, faculty would view their new role as that of a Faculty Guide (FG). From this vantage point, the faculty member (the instructor) functions as the guide on the side and adopts a decentralized approach to pedagogy (Guldborg, 2008). Essential to the learning experience was the role of each conference presenter. These presenters were generally not affiliated with the institution, although the instructors did host one session during the conference. From the perspective of the students, the presenters were viewed not only as those leading the sessions, but professional Models and/or Mentors (M).

The student would become the Critical Friend (CF) in their peer relationships within the newly developing professional learning community (PLC) (DuFour, 2004). There is evidence

that social, collaborative, reflective learning is especially helpful for educators (Fahey, 2011). This emerging PLC would attempt to mirror the essential characteristics as identified by Louis (2007) in Figure 1. In the course of meeting with their CF, students were provided with opportunities to participate, journal, and dialogue about in each of the elements.

Shared norms and values	Cooperation & Collaboration
Common focus on learning	Public Practice
Common Expectations	Shared Responsibility
Reflective Dialogue	

Figure 1. K. Seashore Louis, *Teachers Work and School Improvement: Finding the Keys to Success*, Teacher Working Conditions Symposium, (2007)

The researchers hoped that evidence of the process and outcomes from the course innovation would provide the substantiation to encourage other faculty and administrators to view the conference-course as a viable alternative to the traditional course model. This model has the potential to offer duality of purpose: first, academic quality and, secondly, a tool for student motivation, retention and persistence. "It is precisely at such a tipping point that curricular transformation, or more to the point, experiential transformation, is ours for the taking" (Livingston, 2010, p.61).

### The Procedures

Faculty began by completing a needs analysis/market survey to determine the interest of the students in a conference-centered course offering. When a critical mass emerged, the process of registration was undertaken. Since this was an innovation for the university, it was important to engage other departments in basic information about this unique offering. Communication became the first imperative. Our commitment to communication protected both the curricular innovations and the volunteer faculty from some of the inherent risks of innovative higher education (Colin & Heaney, 2001; Patterson, 2007). The faculty hoped to avoid "the siege mentality...where they felt under constant pressure (if not attack) to explain and justify their program at home" (Patterson, 2007, p. 80) by paying early attention to communication strategies. The authors actively sought engagement from Student Services, Admissions and Administration through a mutual interdependence and commitment to program quality and student support. Engagement of the administration guaranteed both academic and fiscal support which translated into positive leadership throughout the institution for the pilot project. Fiscal concerns primarily focused on registration fees. Student Services and students required clarification about conference registration procedures (separate from course registration procedures), accommodation information, and explicit course requirements. All of these tasks supported student clarity in terms of expectations, procedures, and required commitment.

*The Population Sample and Instrumentation.* In the Spring 2009 course, 41 students enrolled in the course; in the Spring 2010 course, 32 enrolled. Each year the student composition was essentially the same, with nearly all participants being female (76% in

2009 and 90% in 2010) and African American (approximately 80% in each course). Each year, one course was offered for the Master of Education Leadership program and one for Education Specialist and Doctoral programs. Students enrolling in the course understood that attendance and participation with the conference was a critical part of the course. The conference topic and sponsoring association were not the same in both years. Curriculum was the focus the first year, while the second year focused on pedagogy.

Both formal and informal feedback was solicited immediately at the completion of the conference as well as after the submission of course grades. Of the 41 students enrolled in the Spring 2009 course, 25 responded to the survey which was composed of both open and closed-ended items. Of the 32 enrolled in the Spring 2010 course, 22 students responded. As a result of student feedback in 2009, the 2010 survey included a few changes. Most questions remained unchanged the second year (during cycle two), allowing for response comparison from one year to the next.

*Syllabus.* Since the institution has many campuses operating under a unified set of policies and consistent course objectives, adherence to the course outcomes was non-negotiable and formed the assessment framework from the outset. The syllabus was designed and developed so that it would be both directive and flexible to allow for rigor and creativity. To use a musical analogy, the syllabus would provide the basic melody from which students were to create their own symphonies. Each student-created syllabus was grounded in basic components, but unique to the student interests and goals. As Sanacore (2008) states, "...successful teachers and students realized that motivation and performance are predicated more on freedom and autonomy than on coercion and constraint" (p. 142). While the authors recognized this to be true, this fact needed to be balanced with the findings of Chu and Tsai (2009) which indicate that not all students are ready to be challenged to self-motivation and independent learning. Faculty realized the delicate balance between giving freedom, challenging, and asking students for too much too soon. "Experimental education takes constant monitoring and maintenance" (Patterson, 2007, p.80).

The first class session met approximately one month prior to the beginning of each of the conferences. At this meeting, the syllabus was discussed and guidelines and expectations were explained. The conference aspect of the course was not a surprise, but the details and specifics were not explained until the first class session. As expected, students naturally had questions about the co-constructive nature of the syllabus, and the assessment process. The authors became increasingly attuned to Nieweg's (2004) assertion "that learning and assessment can be seen as two sides of the same coin" (p.204). Faculty was present to answer questions and to encourage students.

Aspects of the syllabus, which were determined for the students, included the number of required session hours, the required group meetings with the student's group members and faculty guide, documentation required as evidence of attendance, and final project elements. Elements which were co-constructed by the students included conceptualizing the theoretical framework from which they wished to view the conference sessions, the specific sessions that they would attend, and the selected journal elements and research support pieces that would become the final project. These required students to use critical thinking (Brookfield, 2005) and engage creativity (Livingston, 2010). In 2010, the course evolved slightly as part of the second action research cycle. Students used not only the first class session and faculty office hours, but a blended online platform to communicate their

evolving syllabus, questions and concerns to the faculty, and to communicate with and support other class members.

At the end of each session attended, students were expected to ask the presenter to sign off on a template that had been developed for this purpose (see Appendix). This was primarily intended to verify student attendance, but the incidental learning that emerged from this assignment suggested that this activity became the conduit by which students could make meaningful connections with practitioners excited about their work (Marsick & Watkins, 2001). According to Marsick and Watkins (2008) incidental learning "...includes such things as learning from mistakes, learning by doing, learning through networking, learning from a series of interpersonal experiments" (p. 187). The faculty could not have predicted the degree to which the incidental learning would impact the student experience. From the faculty lens, students began to conceptualize themselves as not merely students, but also professionals and emerging scholars. Even the international religious community is affirming the power of incidental learning (English, 1999). Newly acquired perspectives appear to provide learners with the confidence to engage in deeper, more meaningful, and connected learning experiences.

The first evidence of this deeper engagement was revealed in their subsequent discussions (both during and following the conference) of the utility of the signature activity. The greater impact of this newfound academic confidence permitted them to link their new perspectives to their everyday practice. In this growth process, they were able to confront challenges and issues that previously been unexamined in light of scholarly resources.

*Networking and Professional Learning Communities.* Networking and interacting were intentional and part of the original syllabus design. Travel to and from the conference and accommodations at the conference site (which was approximately an hour away in 2009 and two hours away in 2010) extended opportunities which were already present at the conference. In addition, the 2010 participants also had access to online discussion communities. The initial step in building this professional learning community was arranged at the first on campus meeting. Commitment, recognized as an essential element of a professional learning community by Doolittle, Sudeck, and Rattigan (2008), was viewed as critical to the success of this innovation such that a policy was adopted which prohibited the students from dropping the class past a certain point in the term (typical withdrawal was still a required, although not utilized by the students for this course, option). This policy meant that students were engaged in critical thinking (Brookfield, 2005) even as they considered making their choice to attend. Since the faculty understood the power of public commitment to the learning community a signed pledge was incorporated. The faculty, in concert with Reed and Marienau (2008), understood that, "Adult commitment... is fueled by creativity and reflective thought, by critical analysis and tough-minded testing" (p.97).

During the first meeting, faculty guides began the process of building the professional learning community through validating students' prior commitment. Discussion and reflection on the journey, yet to be taken, was interspersed with humor and openness to all inquiry. There was no doubt that "...the focus on independent problem solving and decision making by the students and their accountability for the outcomes" (Nieweg, 2004, p.205) was the mainstay of the curriculum innovation. It was in this initial engagement that the importance of independence in the learning process as an underpinning became transparent. Shared expectations, fears, and hopes were discussed. This discussion confirmed for the participants that the social aspect of the conference was also an essential



component in the experience, and that this aspect would be linked to their professional learning and creativity in ways they could not yet comprehend. "The complexity of modern life challenges adults, more than ever, to understand other perspectives, tolerate ambiguity, and recognize the relationship of context to knowing" (Reed & Marienau, 2008, p.98).

At this early stage students most likely did not appreciate the connectedness of the social and academic experience, but the faculty did. Since the faculty recognized the importance of this dimension, a planned reception was incorporated into the 2009 co-constructed syllabus which provided an opportunity for the professional learning community to experience shared goals, aspirations, and celebrations. In 2010, students were expected to attend and at some point organize as a smaller group during one of the symposium receptions already planned by the conference committee. As Nathan (2008) points out,

Teachers must have structured time to share, write, and talk about their teaching and their students. Otherwise, teaching is a solitary activity, all too often leading to unsatisfactory results for both teachers and students. A school with a healthy professional learning community will maintain a razor sharp focus on student achievement; its faculty will feel a common ownership and responsibility for that achievement; and its students will achieve success. (p.3)

While the faculty wanted the students to experience the momentum of the larger community, logistically and academically, graduate students need to be in smaller groups to maximize the learning. The division was based on alphabetical order and each group was randomly assigned a faculty member in the new role of FG. This resulted in groups being composed of master's, specialist, and doctoral students which the authors believed would offer an opportunity for integrating the various levels of student scholarship; a rare opportunity given the isolation of traditional course registration. The integration of the three levels of scholarship and the role of faculty guide provided an opportunity for the PLC (DuFour, 2004) to flourish outside of the traditional positions of class standing and instructor roles.

An individual meeting with each of the groups along with the faculty guide was conducted prior to the conference. A second meeting was scheduled during the conference (at about the mid-point). This meeting provided an opportunity for establishing and continuing the discourse within each of the student/faculty guide groups. Beyond that, the conference discussions (both formal within the student's group and informal via the student's newly formed peer-support and critical friend group) provided a forum for extending the conversations within each student's decided upon model which has been deemed important by Garrison (1997) who stated, "Responsibility for self-monitoring reflects a commitment and obligation to construct meaning through critical reflection and collaborative confirmation" (p.26).

### **Assessment Methods**

The rubric for the School of Education outcomes provided the assessment framework. Assessments were both formative and summative and co-constructed by the students as they designed the content of their curriculum. The formative assessment focused on student feedback through a) the small group seminar session at the conference site; b) individual interviews with the FG throughout the conference; c) evidence of reflection and discussion with the critical friend. For the last item, the evidence provided by the students

included reflective notes and journals which gave the faculty insight into the students' increasing capacity to integrate theory and practice.

Some students identified the desire to deviate from the original plan based on learning acquired at the conference, and in each case this was a negotiated change so that the co-constructive nature of the experience was not lost. The artifacts for the summative assessment consisted of a) conceptual framework composed of a set of leadership standards, critical reflection theory and a specific content topic lens (such as diversity, leadership, curriculum design, teaching strategies, leadership, etc) drawn from the conference content and matched to the area of study required by the institution's academic plan of study; b) timeline and session selection chart; c) process and content journal; d) session journey document; and e) summary paper on content topic (completed in APA format and supported with a minimum of 10 current references).

The element of exhibition was claimed by the final work submitted by each student at the conclusion of the conference-based course. The post conference conversation was continued through survey communication and voluntary student e-mails to faculty and administration in support of their experience.

*Survey instrumentation.* In both cycle one and cycle two of the action research, both formal and informal feedback was solicited after the conference as well as after the submission of course grades. Participation in the study was voluntary and optional, students granted permission for their data to be used (and in some cases directly quoted), and the university provided approval and support for the collection of data. For all students surveyed both years, 47 of 73 (64%) students responded to the electronic, voluntary Zoomerang™ survey which contained both open and closed-ended items. The questions remained largely the same from the first to second year (cycle one and two) to allow the researchers to better compare data; however after cycle one, a couple of questions were changed a bit based on student feedback. The parameters of the five-point Likert scale were "Strongly Agree" and "Strongly Disagree". Other closed-ended questions required either a "yes" or "no" response. Descriptive analysis and percentage evaluation was utilized for each question. Data supporting the success of the experiment included:

- Of the Spring 2009 and Spring 2010 participants, 92% and 95% either strongly agreed or agreed that the course contributed to the completeness of their education.
- Of the Spring 2009 and Spring 2010 participants, 96% and 100% either strongly agreed or agreed that the conference-based course increased their interest in the field.
- One hundred percent of Spring 2009 and 95% percent of Spring 2010 students responded "yes" when asked if they would recommend the conference-based course to a peer in their program.

Other qualitative data which indicated the students' thoughts about the conference course were responses to open ended questions about ways in which the conference affected professional development and day-to-day practice. One student stated that, "It gave me a new zeal to reform my own corner of education. Also, I realized a renewed interest in my own refinement." Another stated that the "conference expanded my knowledge and ideas about professional development." A third student commented that "I feel more energized and excited about both my education as well as how I can use the information I gained from

the conference in my classroom.” Still other students stated enthusiasm for the networking, relationship development, and encouragement components. Two notable comments were that, “The networking was phenomenal. The workshops were inspiring and facilitated higher order learning. I became more convinced that education was to be my next field” and “The unique opportunity to engage in conversation with experts in the field is invaluable and provides participants with the ability to network with those experts after the conference is over.”

*Unsolicited student feedback.* Some students felt particularly positive about their conference experience and sent emails to the campus administrators and faculty guides (prior to receiving the survey). Their feedback was appreciative and supportive in nature, and provided confirmation of the potential meaningfulness of the conference-based course for students. Two excerpts are noted below (and pseudonyms used to protect the confidentiality of the student). Mark stated,

Having the opportunity to go and learn best practices in multiple areas and talking with colleagues from around the world was an *awesome* experience; moreover, getting the chance to meet together in our small groups and share our experiences of the conference was most meaningful (for me).

Lucy stated other positive things in her email communication which said, “Interacting with classmates, professors and other professionals was meaningful for me. It was a very awesome experience.”

*Unsolicited faculty feedback.* Immediate faculty feedback communicated an academic and personal satisfaction with the conference-based course. This was clearly evident in the request to continue and to improve the offering into the next action research cycle the following year. They were energized by the quality of the student engagement during the group meetings, the celebratory events, and the capacity of the students to develop professional networks. Faculty commented on the sophistication and academic excellence displayed in all of the assessment pieces. One faculty member stated, “The level of critical thinking that emerged as a result of the conference-based course had an immediate impact on academic advising conversations.” Another faculty member observed that “there was an internalization of students’ commitment to lifelong learning within their practice.”

This innovative approach to graduate curriculum began as a pilot program (the first action research cycle) with faculty members volunteering as faculty guides. Faculty (individually and collectively) recognized the potential impact that this type of graduate offering presents for students, professionals, and institutions. Without the willingness of the volunteer faculty, this course alternative would never have become a reality. The volunteer aspect of the faculty involved in this curriculum innovation is a multi-layered conversation beyond the intention of this paper. Yet, there are significant underlying assumptions about their practice that must be mentioned because of their impact on the success of the curriculum pilot:

- Each faculty member held a deep commitment to the principles of adult learning;
- Each had exemplified creativity in their own practice;
- Each modeled engagement with professional development;

- Each appreciated the potential of the professional learning community to change practice;
- Each assumed responsibility for the development of a learning culture;
- Each was confident in their teaching and learning expertise;
- Each was committed to student success and modeled daily that commitment whether through advising or differentiated instruction.

Collectively the group of four believed as does Von Frank (2009) that “leaders engage others in changing the culture” (p.2) and the conference-based course provided a conduit for change into our traditional curriculum culture.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

Just as Boden, Smartt, Franklin-Guy and Scudder (2006) state, “Curriculum must intentionally move students toward the goals of epistemological sophistication and self-directedness” (p. 138). The effectiveness of the innovative curriculum centered within the context of a professional conference as a vehicle for moving students toward self-directedness was confirmed by the results of the participant responses to the survey both in content and high rate of return, which was over 60%. Some of the key findings which are consistent with literature (Kranzow & Hyland, 2009; Reed & Marienau, 2008) were that networking and community building were critical elements of the course, that students are motivated to better themselves and continue in their practice after participating and engaging in a conference-based course, and that students can become more self-motivated and creative when they see peers excelling in areas in which they also have the capability of excelling. As Nanton (2009) confirms,

knowledge is viewed as a connected systemic process of thought, subject to examination and ongoing collaborative construction with equitable contributions. Truth becomes inclusive of varying perspectives, while the self is dynamic with a core of stability that is personally and culturally constructed. (p. 18)

The confirmation of these successes, although worthy in themselves, provide the pillars from which further research can be conducted and future course development can be refined. One item that students made note of in the electronic survey was that they wanted to meet on campus after completing their projects. In further action research cycles, a refined syllabus could be enhanced by provision for students to present their final products to each other. Once again highlighting that within knowledge construction and meaning making there is a core desire and human need to share this complexity (Windschitl, 2002).

A second item students noted was the recognition of the importance of the presenter/mentor signature. Faculty did not predict how this minor activity (initially required as verification of session attendance) could transform into a gateway for professional conversations and expanded networks. While graduate students are oftentimes in positions of authority and control in their day-to-day lives, placed in the academic environment, the faculty observed their tendency to dismiss their own expertise and exchange it for the expertise of the presenter(s). The acquisition of the signature compelled students to confront the issue of power imbalance and communicate in conversations with experts with whom they may have been feeling ‘lesser,’ if only subconsciously. “This involves struggling to sustain a working compromise between the meaning individuals

attribute to themselves, and the social (or institutional) identities made available to them" (Smyth, 2006, p.290). They moved from passive recipients to learners who could, as Nieweg (2004) states, "navigate by themselves" the terrain of scholarship and professionalism (Smyth, 2006, p.207). As the faculty observed and engaged with this phenomenon, their pedagogical philosophy dictated their need to practice scaffolding that would simultaneously disengage them from the traditional faculty role and allow them to embrace the faculty guide role.

These conversations collectively helped students to view themselves as active participants in the research discussion and context (Kranzow & Hyland, 2009). Critical reflection, motivation, self-direction, commitment, new relationships, changing perspectives (in other words, meaning making) moved from the pages of the texts to active engagement with the learner in the context of a conference-based course filled with learning, connections, and professionalism.

In summary, the authors of this curriculum innovation experiment have found their own critical reflections interspersed with the significant questions posed by Whitten and Anderson (2010), "*How do we move from merely coping to thriving? How do we develop and sustain feelings of power, inspiration and energy in the face of internal and external roadblocks?*" Their answer states, "We can start by creating safe spaces for conversations as we build new communities and cooperative ventures that yield high-quality, robust results and benefits" (p.19). As indicated earlier, students had expressed some fears for their participation in the academic endeavor. For the most part, these fears pertained to their lack of confidence in their own knowledge, the semi-structured nature of the course, their unfamiliarity with a research conference, and/or anxiousness about meeting those who were authoring their texts and other literature. These fears were mitigated and negotiated by the support of the critical friends group and process, their interactions with conference attendees and presenters, as well as their own power in the learning experience.

Those of us teaching in Higher Education, specifically the authors of this article, have seen the power of curriculum and pedagogical innovation. It has the capacity to re-invent the adult learners' academic experience, and also has the potential to invigorate faculty practice, as faculty members observe their students flourishing academically and professionally. Curriculum leaders must continue to engage with the innovative process, to critically reflect, and to seek feedback from all involved. By doing so, we can collectively sustain the co-construction of knowledge and meaning making that is underpinned by perspective transformation. As Mezirow (1981) states, "Perspective transformation involves not only becoming critically aware of habits of perception, thought and action, but of the cultural assumptions governing the rules, roles, conventions and social expectations which dictate the way we see, think, feel and act" (p. 129).

Recommendations for those considering innovative curriculum such as this are encouraged to be mindful of a few things. First, the support of institutional leadership is essential to fostering a culture of appreciation for the curriculum and the new experiences which go with it. Second, the new experiences are not always positively received. From the student perspective, the negative responses were almost non-existent with the exception of their initial fears and concerns. For system processes, the new experiences may not always fit neatly into the existing structures. For example, some institutions may find scheduling to be a challenge due to most of the course hours taking place within a very small time frame.

Future studies might investigate a larger population, and some may find the small number to be a weakness of this study; however, the small population provided the vehicle for an in-depth understanding of the experience (Creswell, 2007). Further, it allowed the faculty members to more closely mentor each student in the course (Schön, 1983).

If we are to serve the students of the next century, as curriculum leaders in Higher Education we cannot stand on the periphery of tradition. We are confident that others have been engaging in similar curriculum innovation despite the ongoing impetus for standardization and declining fiscal resources. We welcome them into this conversation so that as colleagues we may experience the learning and creativity that derives from collective knowledge construction; that same experience that we have attempted to model for our students through this curriculum innovation.

### References

- Barr, R.B., & Tagg, J. (1995). From teaching to learning—a new paradigm for Undergraduate education. *Change*, 27 (6), 13-25.
- Boden, C.J, Smartt, J.T., Franklin-Guy, S. & Scudder, R.R. (2006). The relationship between personal epistemological beliefs and self-directedness: Implications for practice and for institutional change. *International Journal of Learning*, 12 (10), 133-141.
- Brookfield, S. (2005). Critical thinking. In L. English (Ed.), *International encyclopedia of adult education* (pp. 168-173). New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Chu, R., & Tsai, C. (2009). Self-directed learning readiness, internet self-efficacy and preferences towards constructivist internet-based learning environments among higher-aged adults. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, 25(5), 489-501.
- Colin iii, S., & Heaney, T. (2001). Negotiating the democratic classroom. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, Fall (91) 29-37.
- Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Doolittle, G., Sudeck, M., & Rattigan, P. (2008). Creating professional learning communities: The work of professional development schools. *Theory Into Practice*, 47(4), 303-310.
- DuFour, R. (2004). What is a "Professional Learning Community"? *Educational Leadership*, 5, 6-11.
- Gardner, S. (2008). Fitting the mold of graduate school: A qualitative study of socialization in doctoral education. *Innovative Higher Education*, 33(2), 125-138.
- Garrison, D. (1997). Self-directed learning: Toward a comprehensive model. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 48(1), 18.
- Gordon, S.P. (2008). Introduction. In S.P. Gordon (Ed.), *Collaborative Action Research* (pp.

1-12). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

- Guglielmino, L.M. (2008). Why self-directed learning? *International Journal of Self-Directed Learning*, 5(1), 1-14. Retrieved from [http://www.taosinstitute.net/Websites/taos/Images/ResourcesManuscripts/Informal%20Learning%20of%20Kidney%20Recipient%20IJSDL\\_5.1-2008.pdf](http://www.taosinstitute.net/Websites/taos/Images/ResourcesManuscripts/Informal%20Learning%20of%20Kidney%20Recipient%20IJSDL_5.1-2008.pdf)
- Guldborg, K. (2008). Adult learners and professional development: Peer-to-peer learning in a networked community. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 27 (1), 35-49.
- Hay, K., & Barab, S. (2001). Constructivism in practice: A comparison and contrast of apprenticeship and constructionist learning environments. *Journal of the Learning Sciences*, 10(3), 281-322.
- Kranzow, J. & Hyland, N. (2009). The conference course: Inspiring students to self-directed learning. *International Journal of Self-Directed Learning*, 6(2), 40-52. Retrieved from <http://www.oltraining.com/SDLwebsite/IJSDL/IJSDL6.2-2009.pdf>
- Le Cornu, A. (2009). Meaning, internalization, externalization toward a fuller understanding of the process of reflection and its role in the construction of the self. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 59(4), 279-297.
- Livingston, L. (2010). Teaching creativity in higher education. *Arts Education Policy Review*, 111, 59-62. doi: 10.1080/10632910903455884
- Louis, K.S. (2007). Teachers work and school improvement: Finding the keys to success. Symposium conducted at the meeting of Teacher Working Conditions
- Lovitts, B.E., (2005). Being a good course-taker is not enough: A theoretical perspective on the transition to independent research, *Studies in Higher Education*, 30(2), 137-154.
- Marsick, V., & Watkins, K. (2001). Informal and incidental learning. *New Directions for Adult & Continuing Education*, (89), 25-34.
- Mezirow, J. (1981) A critical theory of adult learning and education, *Adult Education*, 32(1), 3-24.
- Nanton, C. (2009). Ties that bind: Cultural referent groups and coping strategies of adult women as learners. *New Directions for Adult & Continuing Education*, (122), 13-22. doi:10.1002/ace.330.
- Nathan, L. (2008). Teachers talking together: The power of professional community. *Horace*, 24(1).
- Nieweg, M. (2004). Case study: Innovative assessment and curriculum redesign. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 29(2) 203-214.
- Patterson, M. (2007). The Rise and Fall of Innovative Higher Education: An Australian University Case Study. *Innovative Higher Education*, 32(2) 71-84.

- Reed, S., & Marienau, C. (2008). Maintaining a steady fire: Sustaining adults' commitment to community based learning. *New Directions for Adult & Continuing Education*, (118), 97-107. doi:10.1002/ace.299
- Sanacore, J. (2008). Turning reluctant learners into inspired learners. *Clearing House*, 82(1), 40-44.
- Schön, D.A. (1983). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Smyth, J. (2006). 'When students have power': Student engagement, student voice, and the possibilities for school reform around 'dropping out' of school. *International Journal Leadership In Education*, 9(4) 285-298.
- Stringer, E. (2007). Action research in education (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Prentice Hall: New Jersey. communities: A Review of the literature. *Journal of Educational Change*, 7(4), 221-258.
- U.S. Department of Education. (2006). *A test of leadership: Charting the future of U.S. higher education* (Publication ED493504). Retrieved from [http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content\\_storage\\_01/0000019b/80/29/e0/ce.pdf](http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/29/e0/ce.pdf)
- Von Frank, V. (2009). Leadership teams create lasting change. *Tools for Schools*, 13(1), 1-3.
- Whitten, L., & Anderson, L. (2010). Learning to celebrate and cope with professional success, workplace challenges. *Diverse Issues in Higher Education*, 26(25), 19.
- Windschitl, M. (2002). Framing constructivism in practice as the negotiation of dilemmas: An analysis of the conceptual, pedagogical, cultural, and political challenges facing teachers. *Review of Educational Research*, 72(2), 131.
- Wlodkowski, R., & Westover, T. (1999). Accelerated courses as a learning format for adults. *Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education*, 13(1), 1-20.

## Appendix

### Workshop Attendance Summary Template

Your Name:

Session Title:

Presenter(s):

Date Attended:

Time:



Signature of Presenter

What question did you ask the presenter?

\*\*\*\*\*

Session Title:

Presenter(s):

Date Attended:

Time:

Signature of Presenter

What question did you ask the presenter?